

H.G. Wells

H.G. Wells, in full Herbert George Wells (born Sept. 21, 1866, Bromley, Kent, Eng.—died Aug. 13, 1946, London) English novelist, journalist, sociologist, and historian best known for such science fiction novels as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* and such comic novels as *Tono-Bungay* and *The History of Mr. Polly*.

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EARLY LIFE

Wells was the son of domestic servants turned small shopkeepers. He grew up under the continual threat of poverty, and at age 14, after a very inadequate education supplemented by his inexhaustible love of reading, he was apprenticed to a draper in Windsor. His employer soon dismissed him; and he became assistant to a chemist, then to another draper, and finally, in 1883, an usher at Midhurst Grammar School. At 18 he won a scholarship to study biology at the Normal School (later the Royal College) of Science, in South Kensington, London, where T.H. Huxley was one of his teachers. He graduated from London University in 1888, becoming a science teacher and undergoing a period of ill health and financial worries, the latter aggravated by his marriage, in 1891, to his cousin, Isabel Mary Wells. The marriage was not a success, and in 1894 Wells ran off with Amy Catherine Robbins (d. 1927), a former pupil, who in 1895 became his second wife.

EARLY WRITINGS

Wells's first published book was a *Textbook of Biology* (1893). With his first novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), which was immediately successful, he began a series of science fiction novels that revealed him as a writer of marked originality and an immense fecundity of ideas: *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), and *The Food of the Gods* (1904). He also wrote many short stories, which were collected in *The Stolen Bacillus* (1895), *The Plattner Story* (1897), and *Tales of Space and Time* (1899). For a time he acquired a reputation as a prophet of the future, and indeed, in *The War in the Air* (1908), he foresaw certain developments in the military use of aircraft. But his imagination flourished at its best not in the manner of the comparatively mechanical anticipations of Jules Verne but in the astronomical fantasies of *The First Men in the Moon* and *The War of the Worlds*, from the latter of which the image of the Martian has passed into popular mythology.

Behind his inventiveness lay a passionate concern for man and society, which increasingly broke into the fantasy of his science fiction, often diverting it into satire and sometimes, as in *The Food of the Gods*, destroying its credibility. Eventually, Wells decided to abandon science fiction for comic novels of lower middle-class life, most notably in *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900), *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905), and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910). In these novels, and in *Tono-Bungay* (1909), he drew on memories of his own earlier life, and, through the thoughts of inarticulate yet often ambitious heroes, revealed the hopes and frustrations of clerks, shop assistants, and underpaid teachers, who had rarely before been treated in fiction with such sympathetic understanding. In these novels, too, he made his liveliest, most persuasive comment on the problems of Western society that were soon to become his main preoccupation. The sombre vision of a dying world in *The Time Machine* shows that, in his long-term view of humanity's prospects, Wells felt much of the pessimism prevalent in the 1890s. In his short-term view, however, his study of biology led him to hope that human society would evolve into higher forms, and with *Anticipations* (1901), *Mankind in the Making* (1903), and *A Modern Utopia* (1905), he took his place in the British public's mind as a leading preacher of the doctrine of social progress. About this time, too, he became an active socialist, and in 1903 joined the Fabian Society, though he soon began to criticize its methods. The bitter quarrel he precipitated by his unsuccessful attempt to wrest control of the Fabian Society from George Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1906–07 is retold in his novel *The New Machiavelli* (1911), in which the Webbs are parodied as the Baileys.

MIDDLE AND LATE WORKS

After about 1906 the pamphleteer and the novelist were in conflict in Wells, and only *The History of Mr. Polly* and the lighthearted *Bealby* (1915) can be considered primarily as fiction. His later novels are mainly discussions of social or political themes that show little concern for the novel as a literary form. Wells himself affected not to care about the literary merit of his work, and he rejected the tutelage of the American novelist Henry James, saying, "I would rather be called a journalist than an artist." Indeed, his novel *Boon* (1915) included a spiteful parody of James. His next novel, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916), though touched by the prejudice and shortsightedness of wartime, gives a brilliant picture of the English people in World War I.

World War I shook Wells's faith in even short-term human progress, and in subsequent works he modified his conception of social evolution, putting forward the view that man could only progress if he would adapt himself to changing circumstances through knowledge and education. To help bring about this process of adaptation Wells began an ambitious work of popular education, of which the main products were *The Outline of*

History (1920; revised 1931), *The Science of Life* (1931), cowritten with Julian Huxley and G.P. Wells (his elder son by his second wife), and *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind* (1932). At the same time he continued to publish works of fiction, in which his gifts of narrative and dialogue give way almost entirely to polemics. His sense of humour reappears, however, in the reminiscences of his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934).

In 1933 Wells published a novelized version of a film script, *The Shape of Things to Come*. (Produced by Alexander Korda, the film *Things to Come* [1936] remains, on account of its special effects, one of the outstanding British films of the 20th century.) Wells's version reverts to the utopianism of some earlier books, but as a whole his outlook grew steadily less optimistic, and some of his later novels contain much that is bitterly satiric. Fear of a tragic wrong turning in the development of the human race, to which he had early given imaginative expression in the grotesque animal mutations of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, dominates the short novels and fables he wrote in the later 1930s. Wells was now ill and aging. With the outbreak of World War II, he lost all confidence in the future, and in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945) he depicts a bleak vision of a world in which nature has rejected, and is destroying, humankind.

ASSESSMENT

In spite of an awareness of possible world catastrophe that underlay much of his earlier work and flared up again in old age, Wells in his lifetime was regarded as the chief literary spokesman of the liberal optimism that preceded World War I. No other writer has caught so vividly the energy of this period, its adventurousness, its feeling of release from the conventions of Victorian thought and propriety. Wells's influence was enormous, both on his own generation and on that which immediately followed it. None of his contemporaries did more to encourage revolt against Christian tenets and accepted codes of behaviour, especially as regards sex, in which, both in his books and in his personal life, he was a persistent advocate of an almost complete freedom. Though in many ways hasty, ill-tempered, and contradictory, Wells was undeviating and fearless in his efforts for social equality, world peace, and what he considered to be the future good of humanity.

As a creative writer his reputation rests on the early science fiction books and on the comic novels. In his science fiction, he took the ideas and fears that haunted the mind of his age and gave them symbolic expression as brilliantly conceived fantasy made credible by the quiet realism of its setting. In the comic novels, though his psychology lacks subtlety and the construction of his plots is often awkward, he shows a fund of humour and a deep sympathy for ordinary people. Wells's prose style is always careless and lacks grace, yet he has his own gift of phrase and a true ear for vernacular speech, especially that of the lower middle class

of London and southeastern England. His best work has a vigour, vitality, and exuberance unsurpassed, in its way, by that of any other British writer of the early 20th century.

"H.G. Wells". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.*
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